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THE USE OF PUBLICITY MATERIALS IN NORTH CAROLINA WEEKLIES*

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Abstract

The editors of North Carolina weeklies make relatively little use of the mass of free clip-sheets, news releases, mats and other publicity materials sent them by governmental agencies and special interest groups. Approximately one-half of the 112 sources originating such materials failed to secure a single insertion of their releases in thirty-two North Carolina weeklies over a three weeks' period. Only ten sources were able to secure ten or more insertions. The editors revealed resistance to releases or other publicity materials which feature brand-names and trade associations and which are not well-adapted to local reader interest. The results of this investigation are compared with those obtained in an earlier study of South Dakota weeklies.

I. INTRODUCTION

An earlier study ^{1/}reported that the editors of South Dakota weeklies made relatively little use of the mass of free clip-sheets, news releases, mats and other publicity materials sent them by a large number of agencies, special interest groups, and institutions. The present study undertakes to determine the extent to which the editors of North Carolina weeklies make use of similar publicity materials.

The authors were able to inspect and catalogue all the releases and other publicity materials received by two North Carolina weekly newspapers during a three weeks' period.^{2/} This was done on the assumption that it would provide a fair sample of the materials being received by North Carolina weeklies.

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^{1/} G. L. Abernethy and P. M. Berry, "The Use of Publicity Materials in South Dakota Weeklies," Rural Sociology, XI, (December, 1946), 346-355.

^{2/} March 11-April 1, 1948.

For five consecutive weeks ^{3/} following the first week's cataloguing of these materials thirty-two North Carolina weeklies were inspected to determine the number of times, if any, such publicity materials were actually inserted by the editors of the weeklies. The thirty-two weeklies were selected from the four geographical areas of the State--Tidewater, Coastal Plain, Piedmont, and Mountain--in proportion to their relative population. Following the compilation of the data on actual insertions of publicity materials, a questionnaire was sent to the editors of the thirty-two weeklies to ascertain their attitudes toward the publicity materials they were receiving. The entire study was confined to free publicity materials and thus no analysis was made of the content of Western Newspaper Union and other syndicated materials ordinarily purchased by the weekly newspapers.

II. THE SAMPLE

There are 141 North Carolina weekly newspapers listed in the 1946 Ayer Directory of Newspapers and Periodicals. Thus the thirty-two North Carolina weeklies inspected represent a 22.7% sample. They reported circulation figures ranging from a low of 750 to a high of 3,900. The median circulation was 1,926. All of these figures are considerably higher than those reported in the South Dakota study.^{4/} The distribution for the North Carolina weeklies is as follows:

Circulation	No. of Weeklies
500- 999	2
1,000-1,499	6
1,500-1,999	9
2,000-2,499	8
2,500-2,999	3
3,000-3,499	2
3,500-3,999	2

The North Carolina sample differs markedly from the earlier South Dakota sample in the use made by the editors of Western Newspaper Union syndicated materials. Only two of the thirty-two North Carolina weeklies used regularly four pages of WNU "ready-prints" in contrast to eleven of the thirty-seven South Dakota weeklies. Four of the North Carolina weeklies used single column WNU features while eleven of the South Dakota weeklies fell into this category.

III. USE OF RELEASES

Examination of the sample of thirty-two North Carolina weeklies for five consecutive weeks revealed that only one weekly (3.1%) had not inserted any releases or other publicity materials. This was a weekly whose circulation

^{3/} March 18-April 29, 1948.

^{4/} G. L. Abernethy and P. M. Berry, op. cit., p. 347.

was slightly above the median. In the earlier South Dakota sample 13.5% of the weeklies did not insert publicity materials.

It was found that four of the thirty-two North Carolina weeklies (12.5%) were in the group using from 1 to 4 releases during the five weeks period. All four weeklies exceeded the median circulation. In the South Dakota sample 32.4% of the weeklies were found in this group.

There were eight North Carolina weeklies (25%) which used from 5 to 9 releases in the period covered by the study. In this group three of the weeklies exceeded the median circulation with two of the three weeklies reporting the largest circulations in the entire sample. The group also contained the two weeklies with the smallest circulations. (The weekly with the smallest circulation also used 4 pages of WNU "ready-prints", and two of the weeklies falling below the median circulation used a single column WNU feature.) In the South Dakota study 29.7% of the weeklies were in the group using 5 to 9 releases.

Five North Carolina weeklies (15.6%) fell into the group using 10 to 14 releases. Two of them were below the median circulation; one of these used 4 pages of WNU "ready-prints."

There were seven North Carolina weeklies (21.8%) which inserted from 15 to 19 releases. Four of these weeklies were below the median circulation.

In the group using from 20 to 57 releases were also found seven North Carolina weeklies (21.8%). Five weeklies in this category fell below the median circulation. (Two weeklies in this group used single column WNU features.)

If the figures for the three preceding groups are consolidated, we find that nineteen of the North Carolina weeklies (59.4%) used 10 or more releases. This contrasts sharply with the data of the South Dakota study which revealed that 24.3% of the South Dakota weeklies inserted 10 or more releases. The largest total number of releases used by a single North Carolina weekly in the period studied was 57 while the corresponding number for a South Dakota weekly was 28. ^{5/} Thus more of the North Carolina weeklies used releases and publicity materials and they use more of them than South Dakota weeklies, in the respective periods of time studied. The fact that North Carolina weeklies make much less use of WNU syndicated materials indicates that they have more space available for both local news and publicity materials.

In addition to noting the number of releases used by individual North Carolina weeklies, the releases were tabulated by sources to ascertain the number of insertions in weekly newspapers a given source was able to obtain in the five weeks period. For this purpose all materials from a given source were lumped together. Thus, in some cases the total figure will represent the total number of insertions of a single release while in other cases it will represent the total number of insertions of a variety of releases, mats, or clip-sheets.

SOURCES HAVING 10-186 INSERTIONS

Agricultural Extension Service of North Carolina State College (186)
North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles (46)
North Carolina State College News Bureau (22)
George S. Benson, President, Harding College, Searcy, Arkansas (22)
North Carolina State Education Commission (20)
North Carolina League for Crippled Children (16)
Institute of Life Insurance (14)
National Association of Manufacturers (14)
The Methodist Hour (11)
North Carolina State Department of Agriculture (11)

It is significant to note that the source which led all others by a wide margin in the number of insertions was the Agricultural Extension Service of the North Carolina State College. In the opinion of the authors these releases seemed to be well-written and intelligently adapted to the needs and interests of the readers of rural weeklies. They were used by twenty-six of the thirty-two newspapers in the five weeks period. The releases of the North Carolina Department of Motor Vehicles dealt mainly with accident statistics and the schedules for vehicle inspection. Those of the North Carolina State College News Bureau were simply lists of the students from a given county who were in attendance at the State College. The releases from the State Educational Commission publicized an extensive questionnaire study which the Commission was sponsoring. The releases of President Benson were a weekly column of opinion treating current topics from the viewpoint of conservative businessmen. Two weeklies accounted for nine of the twenty-two insertions of this column. The Institute of Life Insurance was successful in having cartoon mats containing favorable references to life insurance published in six weeklies which did not use a syndicated editorial cartoon. One weekly, however, accounted for six of the fourteen insertions. The Methodist Hour publicized a radio program sponsored nationally by the Methodist Church. This was the only release publicizing a radio feature which appeared in any weekly during the study. The National Association of Manufacturers sends out a clip-sheet of cartoons, features, editorials and quotations, for some of which mats are available. Thirteen of the fourteen insertions of materials from this source appeared in a single weekly. The releases from the State Department of Agriculture presented agricultural statistics and marketing news. The releases from the North Carolina League for Crippled Children were part of a fund-raising campaign and presented "human-interest" material.

In this group of sources having the largest number of insertions no release was published containing a reference to a commercial product or a "brand-name." Five of the sources were state governmental agencies, one a philanthropy, and one a denominational agency. Only three of the sources represented a special business interest or viewpoint and the insertions of their materials were concentrated in a small group of weeklies. It is interesting to note that in the corresponding group of sources with 10 or more insertions in the earlier South Dakota study comparable results were reported. The South Dakota State College Agricultural Extension Service

ranked second in the list of sources. The National Association of Manufacturers had the same number of insertions (14). Another conservative business source had 19 insertions. The National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis had relatively the same position as the North Carolina League for Crippled Children. The chief difference at this point in the two studies lay in the fact that news letters from the two South Dakota congressmen seemed to occupy the place filled by the state governmental agencies in the North Carolina study. 6/

SOURCES HAVING 5-9 INSERTIONS

Textile Information Service (9)
Wake Forest College (9)
North Carolina State Board of Health (8)
Esso Farm News (8)
State Headquarters, Scott for Governor (7)
4-H National Committee on Boys and Girls Club Work (6)
Duke University (6)
North Carolina Council of Churches (6)
North Carolina Petroleum Industries Committee (6)
Veterans Administration (5)
American Cancer Society (5)
Charles M. Johnson for Governor (5)
North Carolina Division, United States Brewers Foundation (5)

In this group only one source managed to secure insertions of materials involving a "brand-name" (Esso). Four other sources promoting the interests of specific trade associations or industry groups were able to secure insertions of their releases. Of these four only one source, Textile Information Service, furnished mats which had a specifically local or regional "human-interest" appeal. Five of its nine insertions were found in the weekly which led the entire sample in use of releases. The releases of the two educational institutions were mainly lists of the names of students from a specific county. The releases of the American Cancer Society and the North Carolina Council of Churches dealt with drives that were being conducted on both a local and state-wide basis. The 4-H releases had some regional appeal. The remaining sources were governmental agencies or candidates for political office.

SOURCES HAVING 1-4 INSERTIONS

The American National Red Cross (4)
Wilmington Post (4)
Association of American Railroads (3)
"Charleston's Famous Gardens" (3)
National Association of Greeting Card Publishers (3)
University of North Carolina News Service (2)
American Overseas Aid, United Nations Appeal for Children (2)
Girl Scouts of United States of America (2)
North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission (2)
North Carolina Education Association (2)
National Cotton Council of America (2)

National Baseball Congress (2)
Mississippi State Democratic Party (2)
John A. Clements Associates (2)
Southern Railway System (2)
Peck Associates (2)
American Iron and Steel Institute (2)
Appalachian State Teachers College (1)
Atlantic Greyhound Corporation (1)
Citizen's Committee on Displaced Persons (1)
Industrial News Review (1)
International Council of Religious Education (1)
News Bureau, Greensboro College (1)
North Carolina Highways and Public Works (1)
North Carolina Merchants' Association (1)
North Carolina State Employment Security Commission (1)
Ohio State University News Service (1)
SC Syndicate (1)
Senator William Umstead (1)
War Department, Public Information Office, California (1)

In this group of thirty-one sources whose releases ordinarily secured only one or two insertions during the five weeks period were five educational institutions or associations, four governmental agencies, six philanthropic or religious organizations, and two political sources. There were six sources which were successful in securing the insertion of releases mentioning "brand-names" or the trade name of a service offered for sale. Both these releases and those emanating from eight trade association or industry-wide sources seemed to be poorly adapted to the reader interests of small-town and rural weeklies.

SOURCES HAVING NO INSERTIONS

There were 57 sources which failed to obtain a single insertion in the thirty-two weeklies.^{7/} They may be classified as follows:

Industrial Corporations and trade associations.....	23
Governmental bureaus and agencies.....	7
Political organizations.....	4
Educational institutions and organizations.....	4
Magazine publishers.....	4
Health and medical organizations.....	4
Fraternal and service organizations.....	3
Labor Organizations.....	3
Religious organizations.....	2
Farm organizations.....	1
Miscellaneous.....	2
Total.....	57

^{7/} A list containing the names of these sources may be obtained from the authors.

The "brand-name" and trade associations releases emanating from the 23 sources lacked either a regional or local "angle." Some of them were so bulky and technical that no editor of a weekly would ever have the time to adapt them to his uses. Others were simply bids for free advertising as in the case of recipes or columns of household hints which feature a "brand-name." The most that such releases can hope for is only an occasional insertion. Since most of these materials are sent out by advertising agencies, the practice invites the suspicion that advertising clients are being misled as to the possible value of the service rendered. There is some truth in the contention of editors of weeklies that the same money spent on advertisements would at least lead to the appearance of the message in many more weeklies. Whether advertisements prepared with the same lack of regard for the interests of the readers of North Carolina weeklies, as are some of the releases, would be effective advertisements is a question which lies outside the scope of this investigation.

There are a number of governmental agencies and philanthropic organizations in this group of 57 sources which were able to secure insertions at times other than the period covered by this study as the authors discovered by cursory examination. Too much significance must not be attached to the fact that one of these sources fell into the group of "no insertions" rather than "1-4 insertions." However, most of the "brand-name" and trade association sources in the "no insertion" category would probably remain there for other periods of time than that covered by this study.

IV. QUESTIONNAIRE RESPONSES

A questionnaire was sent to the editors of the thirty-two North Carolina weeklies examined in this study. Twenty-three questionnaires were returned by the editors. The purposes of the questionnaire were to secure the editors' evaluations of the publicity materials which they received and to determine their stated use of such materials. The latter was checked against what actually appeared in the weeklies over a five weeks' period.

The editors were asked to estimate the weekly volume of publicity materials which they received. None reported receiving fewer than 25 items a week. Thirteen (56.5%) of the editors indicated amounts ranging from 25 to 50 pieces; six (26%) received 75 to 100 pieces; four (17.3%) estimated the weekly volume as 100 or more. This latter estimate possibly represents some confusion with the total volume of mail received.

Four (17.3%) of the editors reported that they opened all releases and publicity materials. One editor (4.3%) discarded 10% of the materials without opening them. Six editors (26%) tossed unopened into the wastebasket 25-50% of the materials; three (13%) reported similar treatment for 50-75% of the publicity materials. Seven (30.4%) of the editors discarded unopened more than 75% while two others (8.6%) claimed they threw away unexamined all of the materials which they received. These replies in general do not appear to be inconsistent with the actual use of the materials by the weeklies.

The respondents revealed considerable variation in their answers to the question, "What percentage of the materials is really advertising and should be paid for at advertising rates?" Three (13%) of the editors judged 10% of the material to be such; one (4.3%) checked 25%; seven (30.4%) estimated 50%; four (17.3%) estimated 75%; seven (30.4%) checked 90%; and one (4.3%) classified all of the material as advertising.

When asked to list examples of the materials which should be paid for at regular space rates five editors (21.7%) did not reply. Thirteen (56.5%) editors listed such materials as releases featuring movie and radio stars, releases mentioning brand-names or companies, or organizations of a non-charitable type. Three (13%) listed political parties. One editor (4.3%) suggested "most of it;" another said, "practically all;" and a third said, "Anything that has a business contact. If they can pay experts to write and make mats, they can pay the paper to carry it." Another editor cited Army news, Government Bond sales, and "trade magazine stuff."

When asked whether they published regularly any of the publicity materials received, seven (30.4%) editors replied in the negative. Eight (34.7%) reported that they made regular use of farm and conservation news from such sources as the State Agricultural Extension Service; eight (34.7%) indicated the regular use of releases with local and county interests such as Army Recruiting Service stories, college news, and releases from State bureaus; one (4.8%) used mats dealing with the American Association of Railroads, Fire Prevention, Government Bonds, Veterans Administration, and "Our Democracy" (Institute of Life Insurance). Only one editor (4.3%) reported that he made regular use of the releases of the State Department of Motor Vehicles although the examination of the weeklies revealed that several other editors were making regular use of them. One editor (4.3%) used "as many as we have time to set and space permits." Another reported the regular use of recipes. In view of the results, reported above, which were obtained from the analysis of the weeklies' actual use of the releases it would appear that the editors under-estimate their regular use of the materials.

"Would you use more of this material if you had more space available?" Ten (43.4%) editors replied with a categorical "No"; ten (43.4%) expressed serious doubts; one (4.3%) answered "yes"; one (4.3%) said "possibly"; two (8.7%) mentioned their limited space and their policy of presenting only local news. Three editors (13%) revealed antagonism toward the "propaganda" slant of the releases.

Nine (39.1%) editors reported that they never received any helpful ideas or background materials for editorials; fourteen (60.8%) indicated that they occasionally received helpful materials. Among the examples cited were: statistics on traffic accidents, interpretations of the nation's economy, contrasts between American and foreign economic systems, comments on national and international affairs, and "Life Insurance Facts."

The editors were asked to state their chief criticisms of the form and content of the materials. Nine replies (39.1%) offered criticisms of which the following are typical: "Old news when we get it," "not localized," "its mat form does not conform with our type faces, nor column size,"

"seldom written in news style." Propaganda and bids for free advertising were criticized by ten editors (43.4%). One reply (4.3%) stated that government agencies send out too many releases and that "every agency sends out a write-up of the same subject."

Six (26%) respondents failed to respond to the question: "What do you find to be most valuable in the materials you now receive?" Nine (39.1%) of the editors who replied listed farm news and agricultural releases. Four editors (17.3%) listed public service information such as Highway releases, Veterans Bureau data, Health Department releases, Social Security information, and local recruiting news. The remaining editors listed a wide variety of materials which were mentioned only once.

"Are there organizations, public relations counselors, government bureaus, and corporations whose materials you are not receiving which you would like to see?" Two (8.7%) editors failed to answer this question. Nineteen (82.6%) editors replied in the negative. One editor (4.3%) replied, "More from industrial organizations. But strictly on the human side, more names and descriptions about people." One editor's reply was, "Yes, the Congressional Record."

V. CONCLUSIONS

1. This investigation supports the finding of the earlier South Dakota study that the results of the blanket mailing of publicity materials to rural weeklies indicate it to be an ineffective method of reaching an appreciable proportion of the readers of weekly newspapers. Approximately half (50.8%) of the total 112 sources failed to secure a single insertion of their releases in the thirty-two North Carolina weeklies. Only ten sources (8.9%) were able to secure ten or more insertions during the period of the study. When the content of the releases was scrutinized it became evident that releases containing brand-name or trade association references were used only to a very limited degree.
2. The South Dakota study reported that the weeklies with the largest circulation made the least use of the releases while those with the smallest circulation made the greatest use of them. This clearly-defined pattern was not found in the North Carolina sample.
3. The releases in general were poorly adapted to local reader interest and the news policies of the weeklies. Most of the sources were agencies operating on a national or state-wide basis which failed to relate the material in their releases to life in a rural community or a small town. Very few of the sources were farm organizations or agencies interested in rural life.
4. North Carolina editors revealed considerable resistance to materials which were essentially bids for free advertising. As a result a large number of releases are discarded upon the mere recognition of a characteristic envelope.
5. The North Carolina weeklies made relatively little use of Western Newspaper Union syndicated materials and thus had more space available for either local news or publicity materials. This probably accounts for the relatively greater use of releases made by the North Carolina editors in contrast to that revealed by the South Dakota editors in the earlier study.

